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Former army officer in Salvador tells of death squad killings

By Robert Parry
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WASHINGTON - A former Salvadoran army officer, planning to seek political asylum in the United States, says he participated in death squad killings in the early 1980s and witnessed the slaughter of civilians by El Salvador's US-backed military.

Ricardo Ernesto Castro, 35, a former army lieutenant and a 1973 West Point graduate, described death squad killing of suspected "subversives" as a routine activity of the Salvadoran army in early 1981. He said he personally commanded four assassination missions, claiming about a dozen lives.

Castro said he also saw the army execute unarmed women and children during a counterinsurgency sweep near the Rio Lempa in the fall of 1981 and leave the bodies in shallow streams as a warning to leftist guerrillas.

"My company was thirsty, but the soldiers would not take water from one of these streams because of these kids' corpses," Castro said in a recent tape-recorded interview at his suburban Washington home.

Castro, who left El Salvador in mid-1982, is the first Salvadoran army officer to publicly state that he participated in death squad killings. He initially told his story to a free-lance reporter for an article in the current issue of Progressive magazine.

Castro said in the interview at his home that he was recruited to work with the CIA and served as a translator for an American who trained the Salvadoran military on interrogation techniques.

Castro's statements support allegations made by private human

rights groups that the Salvadoran military committed massive abuses in the early 1980s, killing tens of thousands of civilians. During those years, the Reagan administration disputed many of the charges but acknowledged that some abuses occurred.

In a July 1982 report certifying human rights progress in El Salvador, the State Department said "there has been no evidence to support periodic guerrilla allegations of large-scale massacres allegedly committed by government forces."

The administration now contends abuses have largely been brought under control, although private human rights groups say government forces still commit selective murders in the cities and use indiscriminate firepower in the countryside.

An estimated 50,000 civilians have died in the 6-year-old civil war.

Castro said he came to the United States in mid-1982 to tell US officials about the corruption and atrocities that many young officers felt were undermining prospects for restoring peace in El Salvador. After his appeals received little attention, he said he decided to stay here with his wife and three children and plans to request political asylum.

Castro said widespread political assassinations represented a policy established by the military high command initially using army personnel, but he added that, by mid-1981, the "death squad" work had shifted to the government security forces, particularly the Treasury Police.

"All the killings I know of were done by the armed forces," Castro said.